

A Man in the Open

by Roger Pocock

Illustrations by
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Pete only cut from his plug into his rein, and rolled the tobacco small for his corn-cob pipe. His winter solitude was ended, and he was master, the caregiver before whom all men bow in the dread northlands. Mother went off content to carry her own water, and Pete, with something of a flourish, lit his pipe.

"Mother!" Pete let out a sharp call, and forgetting her business, mother came quite humbly, as though to heel.

"Yes, Pete?"

He pointed with his pipe at a distant horseman rounding the flank of the hill.

"Brooke?" she whispered, both gauged rheumatic hands clutched at her heart.

"I reckon," said Pete cheerfully. "Thinks he's a circus procession, sure, clattering a loose rear-hind shoe, and her mouth just bleeding as he sows with that spade bit. He's a sure polio. Tots down-hill, too, and suffers in his tail. Incompetent, mother. Look at his feet. He's had as a stale salmon, rotten to the bones. Been drinking, too."

Brooke drew up and dismounted, leaving his rein on the horse's neck. Instead of dropping it to the ground. When Brooke moved to sit on an apajito Pete ordered him to one of the kitchen boxes. "Not Bolt himself may sit on my rigging," said the old gray caregiver.

"I thought," said Brooke quite kindly, "that this harness was mine."

"A half-interest," said mother, "surely."

"I fear," said Brooke, "you sort of misunderstood. Old Taylor did say something about your usefulness as a working partner, and, of course, if we hadn't canceled that preposterous contract with the Hudson's Bay Company there's no doubt your knowledge of the country up north would have been worth paying for. It was, as you say, damned awkward about his being blind as a bat; in fact, I was put to quite a lot of trouble getting the agreeable witness. However," he proceeded a document which mother snatched. "It's all there in black and white, and there's the old fool's signature—holds good in any court of law—proves that I've bought and paid for the whole article. You needn't claim I haven't a clear title—so you needn't stare at me as if I'd forged the signature. It's straight goods, I tell you."

Mother reeled backward, while she grabbed Pete's shoulders so that the agreement fluttered to Brooke's feet. She steadied herself, then with a husky creak, "You made Bolt sign that—blind, dying, so he dunno what's on the paper."

"Can you prove that?" asked Brooke indignantly, as though he spoke to children. "If you say things like that, it's criminal libel, and you're both liable to the Stockmen's House. However," he shrugged his shoulders and put the agreement away. "I don't want to be hard on you, Pete."

"Mister Matheson," mother blurted at him.

Pete, with a whispered word to mother, rose from his bench, and with out appearing to see Mr. Brooke walked past him across the sunlit yard, and on slowly up the great lifting curve of the road to Hundred Mile House.

The sun was setting behind him when Pete rested at last upon the snow-capped summit, and dusk lay like lakes of shadow far below him. At the Hundred he found the lamps alight, and, as usual, Billy offered him a drink. "I ain't drinking," said Pete huskily, as he lurched past the bar into the dining-hall, and on to the little room on the right where Captain Taylor lay.

"Bolt?" he whispered.

"That you, Pete? Sit down," said the boss cheerily. "How's the claim, Pete? Getting close gold, eh?"

"Gold? Say, Bolt, what's the matter, old fellow?"

"Matter? Why, nothing, Pete," the blind eyes shone keenly; "of course I'm not nearly to bedrock yet, and as to what I owe you're jolly well got to wait. How's old Calamity? I got Lost Creek Jim to work at last."

Was the boss dreaming of old times on Lightning Creek?

"Watty's in the mail," said Bolt.

Watty had been dead these thirty years.

Then Pete sat down on the bedside and the two miners prattled about the new flume, and the price of flour in a camp now overgrown with jungle.

A word to Billy would have been enough to get the apajitos to a place of safety, pending the settlement of Pete's just claim as partner. But the caregiver knew well that death had come to take the one man he loved. This was no time for sordid business disturbing Bolt Taylor's peace. It was better to go quietly.

The sky was full of stars as Pete went homeward. The stars were big and round; the forest, in an ecstasy kept vigil all alert, all silent, and the little streams of the thaw were saying

their prayers before the frost sleep of the later hours. The man was at peace. It is not so very much to be a caregiver; but it is a very big thing indeed to be a selfish. The trees kept vigil, the little streams crooned sleepy prayers, the stars in glory humbly served as lamps, and the man made no cry in his pain. Far down in the valley he saw a red flame rise.

Mother saw Brooke rid off to in aspect his Star mules in their pasture far away down the Fraser Canyon. She blacked the stove with justice, she shook the bedding in enmity, not the furniture to rights as though it were being punished, then sat on the damp floor brooding, while twilight deepened.



I Discovered the Old Caregiver Crouched Down Against the Trunk.

ed over a world of treachery, Brooke was a thief, the liar boss had used Pete and thrown him away wrong dry. And Pete was an old fool who would forgive.

She had dreaded the lonely summer when she was left with only squirrel for company. Now Pete would be "settling" around, ruined, and out of work, the man who had been used and thrown aside, the laughing stock of the teamsters who saw his wretched brought low.

The frontier breeds fierce women with narrow venomous enmities to ward the faces of the house. Even if Pete suffered, Brooke should not prosper, or the boss who had failed her man. Mother dragged two five-gallon cans of petroleum from the lean-to and staggered under their weight poured the oil over all Brooke's harness, breathing heavily with her labor, she carried loads of swamy hay and cord-wood until the apajitos were but part of a bonfire. Then with a brand from the stove she set the hay alight. There should be no public shame to break Pete's heart there should be no pack-train unless he were caregiver.

Pete stood beside the ashes, searching mother's face with his slow brooding eyes. Her burning rage was gone and she was afraid, for now she thought too late of all his loving pride in the work, the greatness of the thing which his knowledge and skill had made. That she had burned understanding how love had made this blunder, Pete said no word. He only knew that Bolt had paid him seven hundred dollars cash and kind which must be returned. In silence he turned away, and once more faced the terrible hill which led to the Hundred Mile House.

The spring was in my blood, and I could not sleep. Can any creature sleep when the spring's sweet redness air calls to all nature? Even the little birds were coming back to the north, for now and again as I strolled along the road I would hear a sleepy twitter. "Isn't it dawn yet?" "Not yet, have another nap." So I came to the brow of the great hill whence I should see the dawn.

I was turning back refreshed toward my duty, when I heard something moan. The sound came from under a pine tree, the one at the very top of the long climb which Pete had blazed with his inscription, "Got there." With my heart in my mouth I went to find out what was the matter, and so discovered the old caregiver crouched down against the trunk.

"Pete," I asked in a very shaky voice, "what on earth's the matter?"

"Dying, mum."

"But it's too damp here. Why you'll catch your death of cold."

"That would never do," said mum, how's Bolt?"

"Oh, ever so much better."

"Can't do it," said Pete, "if I did first he'd have the joke on me."

"Wouldn't you like a hot rum?" Pete staggered to his feet. "I'd go for that," he sighed, "just like one man."

So he took my arm, and I helped him along the road.

"She burned them rigging," he said.

"Mother?"

"Yes, Brooke came inspecting them rigging, so mother burned 'em."

"Won't that be rather awkward?"

"Some. You see, mum, they gave me four hundred and five dollars cash so I come to return him the money."

"I don't quite understand. You see, Pete," I suggested, "you and Brooke are the owners. Don't you owe half to yourself and half to Brooke?"

"Well, if that's so, I'll pay myself and owe the rest to Brooke. But he claims the whole Star article."

"In that case you owe the whole of the money to Brooke."

"I don't mind owing Brooke," Pete felt so much better that he was able to walk without help. "Brooke's gone on to inspect mules. I wonder how he'll get on with them mules?"

As it happened, Jesse was a better witness to Mr. Brooke's inspection of the Star mules at their pasture below his ranch. Here, if he narrated:

"The trouble for these horse mules was that they followed a bull's foot down."

Their bell mare, Frue, didn't have been old enough to know better at the age of twenty-three, with gray hair and bald withers, she still still female.

"She and her mates had been grazing maybe half a mile when my new stallion, young Jehoshaphat, happened along with his bunch of twenty-five mares, smelling down wind for a drink. The mares looked so snug and grumpy they could scarcely waddle, but Jehoshaphat was full of spirit, pride, waiting high step at the sight of Frue."

"You should have seen Frue playing up innocent modesty in front of Jehoshaphat, pretending she wasn't there, making believe she was too old and didn't approve of the gentleman, flustering his vanity with all sorts of airs and graces. Frue panted herself along in front of the harem to spite the married mares, and all the mules came worshipping along in pursuit. Those mares gave the mules the biggest kicking you ever saw in your life."

"There was me lying on Face Rock like a little boy at a circus, and there was the performance proceeding so joyful that I never saw Brooke until he rode down right into the middle of the fun. Jehoshaphat got mad and went from Brooke, chasing him around the pasture. Frue chased Jehoshaphat, the mules chased Frue, the harem bit and kicked at everybody, Brooke galloped delirious in all directions, and I laughed until I could hardly hold down the rocks."

"Of course, if Brooke hadn't been a mere mistake on earth, he would have herded gently to the nearest corral, and cut the two outfits apart. But Brooke proceeded to lose his temper, pulled his gun, jumped his wretched sorrel behind a tree, and let drive. He missed the stallion. He shot Frue through the heart."

"There was nothing after that to keep the sixty Star mules together. Some went up the canon, some down a few even swam the Fraser, but the best of them climbed the big cliffs and vanished into the forest."

"I reckon Pete and his arrior could collect those mules and break them to loving a new madman. But with Brooke as caregiver, the great Star Pack-train's numbered with the past, and Matheson's parting shot scarce worth arguing."

"I was sorry to see the fine mules lost, and in my grief I kicked Brooke about one-third of a mile on his way home at last."

CHAPTER VI.

The Black Night.

Estes Narrative.

"I, Reuben Wemyss Taylor, Com-mander R. N., retired, being of sound mind in a dying body, do hereby make my last will and testament:

"And do appoint the lady known as Madame Scotland my sole executress and trustee of all property which I may die possessed of."

"To pay my just debts, and to administer the remainder on behalf of my grandson, James Taylor."

"Until at his coming of age he shall receive the whole estate, if there is any."

"Save only that I bequeath to Mad-ame Scotland my sword and the Victoria Cross."

"And with regard to burial, it is my will that no money whatever shall be



A Revolver Crashed on the Doorstep

spent, but that my body, wrapped in the flag by right of her majesty's commission, shall be consigned to the earth by my neighbors; that no friend of mine shall be allowed to stand on covered clogging-cold, or to wear up-seemly black clothing at the service of the resurrection, or to pull bells which should be pealed when the soul passes to God, or to make pretense of parade of grief for one who is glad to go."

The months of nursing were ended.

My mother should have known that I was afraid when our patient was good, we could have had a few more of those rattle in which he fought off death. At the last, after many hours of silence, he looked up in a boyish voice if he meant to resist to see his uniform in his dream he was leaving school to enter the royal navy."

"Billy was away on an errand to the Falls, and it was Nurse, Pantan's watch below, when at ten in the evening I saw the change come very suddenly. The face of my dear friend, no longer old, but timeless, reflected an unearthly majesty."

For the next hour I was busy replacing the bed services, in haste, for the town had a most peculiar smell. I took it away and lighted candles, but it was not the lamp. Spreading the blanket upon the bed, I bolted from that room. For a time I sat in the dining-hall, but could not stay there. Even in the bathroom I still had so light of something intangible, a sense of being watched, a presentiment of evil coming swiftly nearer."

Closing the door which led into the house, I opened that which gave upon the yard, then placed a flickering candle on the counter, and my chair in front of it facing the darkness."

In the presence of the dead which makes their resting-places serene with quiet beauty, instinct with tenderness toward all living hearts. That presence had entered the good log house, a home of human warmth, of kindly comfort, made holy, consecrated, where people would hush their voices, constrained to reverence."

And in the gracious monotony of the rain, compound of voices joined in requiem, I felt a soothing melancholy beauty, knowing well how peace not of this world had come into the homestead."

But outside that, beyond, in the dread forest, a threat, a menace filled the outer darkness. Fear clutched at my heart, a presentiment told me of evil, of instant danger. Then, as though the horror in the night moved other hearts as well as mine, the Chinese cook came groping his way through the dining-hall and humbly scratched at the door. I let him in and he crept to a stool in the new corner. I whispered to him:

"Are you frightened, Sam?"

"Too plenty much," he quavered, "no fittered bad."

He lighted his pipe and seemed, like me, to be eased by human company. Once only he moved, and in the queerest way came with his thin yellow fingers to touch me, then turned back, crept back to his stool in the corner."

Soon Nurse Pantan joined us, her hair in cork-crowns, looking very plain, plainish because she had not been called at midnight. "What's the matter?" she asked crossly, and for answer I pulled down the blinds. She shivered as she passed the open door to take a chair behind it. She begged me to close the door, but the night was warm, and besides I dared not. Nurse and Chinaman each had a glass of port, and I, feeling much better, for afterward."

An hour passed, the Chinaman nodding like those ridiculous mandarin figures with loose heads, the nurse palld against the gloom, staring until she got on my nerves. I always did like that woman with her precise routine and large flat feet."

Far off I heard the thud of a gunshot, then three shots all together, and afterward a fifth. The evil in the night was coming nearer, and I said to myself, "If I were really frightened I should close that door. I'm half a coward."

The hero himself had strung his Victoria Cross upon a ribbon which I wore about my neck. Could I wear the cross and set an example of cowardice to these poor creatures who crouched in the corners of the room? To show fear is a privilege of the un-depured, but I did long for Jesse."

Through the murmurs of the nearer rain, I felt a throb in the ground, then heard a great growl of a horse galloping. The swift soft rhythm, now loud, now very faint, then very near echoed against the barns, thundered across the bridge, splashed through the flooded yard, and ceased abruptly."

Billy had come home from the Falls, he was stable his roan, he was crossing the yard in haste, his spurs clanked at the door-step, and, dreading his news, a sudden panic seized me. I fled behind the bar."

He entered, astride with rain, shading his eyes against the candle-light; then as it moved he called out, as though I were at a distance, begging me for brandy. His face was haggard, his hand as he drank was covered with dried blood, he slammed the glass on the counter so that it broke.

"You heard the shots?" he said.

"At Spite House?" I whispered.

He nodded.

"You were there?" I asked.

"Half a mile beyond. When I got there it was all dark. Looked in through the end window, but the rain got down my neck, so I went round. The front door was standing open. I listened a while. No need to get shot myself. Thought the place was deserted. Then I heard groans."

"Struck a bunch of matches then, found the hall lamp, and got it alight. Wished I'd got a gun, but there wasn't nothing handy except the poker, so I took that and the light—just followed the groans."

He was lying on the bar-room floor."

"Brooke?"

"Yes. Shot through the throat, blood spurting down the side of his neck, making a big pool on the oil cloth. You know the thing you make with a stick and a scarf to twist up a tourniquet, yes. Well, it choked the wine, so I quit. He whispered something about my thumb hurting the wound, so I told him my father's neck

hurt worse."

"Up to that I thought he was just acting, playing pathetic to touch my feelings. Once he muttered your name, and then he was dead."

"Brooke dead?"

"Yes, he'd been shooting Polly, too. I traced her blood tracks all the way to the front door. Hello, what's that? I thought I heard—"

I listened and there was only the sound of the rain.

"I suppose it's all right," said Billy, "we'd better close that door, though."

But before he could reach the door, Nurse Pantan called him away to her corner, where she spoke in a whisper so that I should not hear, sending him, perhaps, for her cloak. Meanwhile I came from behind the counter to my former seat before the open doorway, where I sat staring into the darkness, unable to feel any more, but just benumbed. Across my weariness flickered the mournful soliloquy of a poor barn-door fowl—"Yesterday an egg, tomorrow a feather duster! What's the good of anythin', why, nothin'!"

Then I, too, heard a sound, in the night, and because Billy and the nurse were muttering, I stood up with the candle-light behind me, trying to see in the darkness. Billy said afterward he had moved quickly, to shut the door, but I waved him back just as the shot rang out.

The explosion blinded, deafened, seemed even to scorch me, while the mirror on the wall came crashing down. Stunned, dazzled, horrified, I felt a dull rage at this attempted murder."

A second revolver-shot stirred my hair, and I'm afraid then that I lost my temper. I am not a fish-fag that I should stoop to fighting a creature such as Polly, but I would have died rather than let her see one trace of fear."

Billy rushed past the firing to reach the door and close it, but I ordered him to desist, then grasped the candle and held it out to show a better light.

"Lower your lights!" I shouted into dark, "you fired too high!"

A revolver crashed on the door-step and low down within three feet of the ground, I saw a dreadful face convulsed with rage, changing to fear. The woman was sinking to her knees, she buried her face in grimy, blood- smeared hands, and rocked to and fro in awful abandonment of grief."

The danger was over now, the menace of evil in the night had vanished. I felt an immense relief, with hands wet, mouth parched, knees shaking, and great need of tears. I knew the strain had been beyond endurance, but how it was gone, although a velvet darkness closing round me, black night swinging round me, sickness—I must not faint, when I had to fight, to keep command, to set an example worthy of Jesse's wife. And there I was sitting in my chair, with drops of sweat forming and pouring on my forehead. Billy, groping on the floor at my feet, had found and lighted the candle, and was holding the flame in the palms of his hands till it steadied and blazed up clear. "Buck up, missus," he was saying. "Cheer-oh. Don't let 'em know you swooned. Grab on to the cross, and make it proud of you. That's right. Laugh, mum! Laugh! Wish'd I'd half yer grit!"

I had come to myself and only Billy knew, who was loyal. As the candle blazed up I saw the Chinaman gibbering like some toothless mask of yellow india-rubber, but that nurse still kept up her sally screaming, until I ordered her to shut her mouth, which she did in sheer surprise."

There lay Polly prone across the doorway on her face, racked with convulsive sobs, until feeling, I suppose the lashing rain on her back, she rose on hands and knees like some forlorn wild animal crawling to shelter, while behind her stretched a trail of wet and blood. I stared until in shame she sat up, still for all the world like an animal lost to human feeling, and to woman's dignity, until as she looked at me a wan, ashamed smile seemed to apologize. She sat back then against the log wall, limp, relaxed with weak

ness.

"Nurse," I called, still with my gaze on Polly, "this woman is wounded. You are a nurse. You claimed to be a nurse."

But Miss Pantan indulged in hysteresis, so I turned to Billy. "Run into the house, get the hip bath, warm water, blankets, bandages."

"Aye, aye, mum," he touched his forehead, and swinging the Chinaman to his feet: "Come along, Sam," he grunted, and hustled him off on duty.

Polly looked up, trusting me with her tawny bloodshot eyes. Her voice was a dreary hoarseness, demanding liquor. But with an open wound, to quicken the heart's action might be fatal, and Polly knew well it was no use pleading. Instead of that she pointed at the nurse, and said, "Send that away."

I turned upon Nurse Pantan who sat forsaken and ostentatious in her corner. "Go," I said, "and make beef tea."

Suff.

I took her by the shoulders, and marched her out of the room, while Polly grinned approval. I came back and asked where she was wounded. She pointed to the left hip, but I dared not remove any clothing which might have caught and sealed the flow of blood. A sole diet of alcohol and months of neglect had made her condition such that I shrank from touching her.

"So you're Kate," she lay against the bottom log of the wall, head back, eyes nearly shut, looking along her nose at me, "Carrotty Kate."

Her own tawny hair, dragged, and hung in snakes, was streaked with dirty gray.

To Be Continued

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